THE LIVING WORD

A MEDITATION ON TEACHING AND BECOMING

MIRZA JAHANZEB BEG

The Living Word: A Meditation on Teaching and Becoming

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Foreword

The following is a rough transcript of a lecture delivered by Dr. Mirza Jahanzeb Beg at Vidya Vanam School, Anaikatti, on Teacher Personality Development, including Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL), on 4th June 2025. The lecture was addressed to a dedicated group of teachers engaged in nurturing young minds.

Vidya Vanam began in 2007 with the aim of serving the tribal and underprivileged children in and around Anaikatti, a village nestled in the foothills of the Nilgiris near Coimbatore. The school is committed to nurturing these children by honoring their traditional knowledge while also providing platforms for wider exposure, empowering them to become the leaders and entrepreneurs of tomorrow. Every child at Vidya Vanam is encouraged to form and express their own opinions, creating a generation unafraid to chase their dreams.

A unit of the Bhuvana Foundation, Vidya Vanam started with 40 children and four teachers. Today, it serves nearly 300 students, with a dedicated staff of 30 full-time

teachers and 20 non-teaching members. Most of the students are first-generation learners from the surrounding villages.

Vidya Vanam is also known for its vibrant National Conference on Education held every alternate year, attracting educators, teachers, and all who care about the future of education. The conference features distinguished speakers such as Samdhong Rinpoche, a scholar and former Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government in Exile; Dr. K VijayRaghavan, Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India; Shashi Tharoor, noted politician, author, and former diplomat; and Aruna Roy, activist and social reformer.

The event also hosts renowned educationists like Rajan Gurukkal, Anil Sadgopal, Santhya Vikram, and Banu Nagesh; respected academicians including A.R. Venkatachalapathy, Sambaiah Gundimeda, and Gita Jayaraj; as well as social workers such as Chintan Girish Modi and R.S. Praveen Kumar. Together, these voices

enrich the conversation on education, inspiring fresh ideas and committed action.

This lecture formed part of a week-long series of workshops held from 2nd to 4th June 2025 at Vidya Vanam, designed to deepen understanding and practice of teacher personality development and socio-emotional learning.

Wednesday, June 4, 2025

Good morning, dear teachers, educators, thinkers, and seekers of knowledge.

It brings me immense joy and a sense of deep gratitude to be standing here amidst all of you, at a place so profoundly and poetically named Vidya Vanam.

What a name! ***Vidya***—knowledge. ***Vanam***—forest. Just take a pause and sit with that for a moment.

Not *Vidya Mandir*, not *Vidya Bhavan*—but *Vidya Vanam*: a forest of knowledge.

This isn't merely a name—it is a philosophy in itself, a living metaphor, a poetic lens through which we can view the entire universe of learning, teaching, and becoming. A forest is not a rigid institution—its ancient, it is alive, it breathes, it hums with life. It shelters, it nurtures, it nourishes without expectation. A forest does not impose; it reveals. It is diverse, layered, complex, unpredictable, and harmonious in its seeming chaos.

So too is true knowledge. So too is the process of becoming a teacher, and the lifelong journey of developing one's personality—not in the cosmetic sense, but in the deeper psychological, emotional, spiritual, and ethical sense.

Let me begin by telling you a small personal story. Years ago, I had returned to my hometown for a short visit. One serene evening, I stepped out for a walk with my younger brother toward the higher reaches of our small town—regions lined with forested hills, quiet and undisturbed, where the air carries a kind of sacred silence.

My younger brother is a thoughtful and curious soul—he's deeply passionate about history and philosophy—and our walks are often long and full of deep conversations. That day, we found ourselves discussing faith, reason, the idea of God, and the tension between miracles and metaphors.

At one moment, he paused and said something that has stayed with me ever since. He said:

"You know, when God introduces Himself in the Qur'an, He doesn't speak of parting the seas or raining fire from the skies. He doesn't speak of grand spectacles. He simply asks man to look around—and within."

And then he recited a verse:
"We shall show them Our signs in the Universe and in their own souls until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth." *(Qur'an 41:53)*

Think about that. Not thunder or lightning. Not some divine drama in the sky. But the forest, the sky, the self. The signs are all around us—if only we are willing to see.
There is a saying in Sufi circles that continues to echo through centuries of contemplative practice: **"Man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu"** — *He who knows himself, knows his Lord.* This deep call toward self-realization is not unique to Sufism. The ancient Greeks etched the words **"Gnōthi seauton"** گنوتهی شیفتهون— *Know Thyself* — above the Temple of Apollo

at Delphi, reminding seekers that the path to truth begins inward. In **Buddhist texts**, we find **"Attā hi attano nātho"** — *The self is the master of the self* or *One is one's own refuge* — a nudge to take responsibility for our inner awakening. Even in Christian mysticism, **St. Augustine** prayed, *"Let me know myself, let me know You,"* while **Christ** declared, *"The Kingdom of God is within you"* (Luke 17:21). Swami Vivekananda famously stated, "You cannot believe in God until you believe in yourself." These sacred echoes across time and faith all converge on one truth: the path to knowing the world, to teaching with truth, begins with knowing the self.

And so, when I first heard the name Vidya Vanam, I felt it wasn't just a poetic name—it was a sacred invocation. A convergence of two eternities: Knowledge and Nature.

Our ancestors and sages understood this intuitively. Long before the modern environmental movement, they practiced what I call *spiritual ecology*. They recognized

nature not as an object, but as a subject—alive, conscious, and divinely instructive.

As the Rigveda beautifully says:
"Let noble thoughts come to us from every side."

Or in the timeless words of the Guru Granth Sahib:
“Pavan Guru, Paani Pita, Mata Dharat Mahat.”
“The Wind is the Teacher, the Water the Father, and the Earth the Great Mother.”

In these lines, you don’t just see theology—you see pedagogy. A blueprint for education, for personality development, that places humility, interconnectedness, and reverence at its center.

So before there were classrooms, there were trees. Before books, there were rivers. Before languages, there was silence—pregnant with meaning.

In the oldest traditions of the world, nature has been the first teacher. It does not preach. It mirrors. It listens. And when we approach it with humility, it reveals the

deepest truths—about life, about others, and about ourselves.

As, my honorable host was introducing me, and I owe her my heartfelt gratitude for that generous and thoughtful introduction, a wild thought crossed my mind that I want to grace you with. It is always humbling to hear oneself described with such kindness, and it reminds me of something I often ask myself: *"Who am I?"* This question, deceptively simple on the surface, has stayed with me like a companion throughout my life.

The great Sufi poet Baba Bulleh Shah once said—words that were later immortalized in the soulful voice of the Punjabi sufi singer Rabbi Shergill—
"Bullah ki jaana main kaun."
Baba Ji said: *"Bullah, to me, I know not who I am."*

In these haunting words, he captured a truth many of us hesitate to face—that identity, the self, the "I," is a mystery not easily solved by logic or biography. For years, I sought this answer through the lens of pure rationality—studying philosophy, science, and

psychology—but the more I tried to pin myself down, the more elusive I became to myself.

And then, slowly, through experience, silence, solitude, and moments of sincere introspection, a realization began to dawn: *I am not a fixed being; I am a seeker*. I am a traveler on the path of search. This path has no final destination, for the journey itself is the destination. The seeking never ends, and neither does the becoming.

In this, I find myself echoing the luminous voice of **Qalandar-e-Lahori**, Allama Iqbal, who offers a timeless call to motion and meaning in his poem titled *"Sultan Tipu Ki Wasiyat" — "The Testament of Tipu Sultan."*

He writes:

"Tu rehnavard-e-shauq hai, manzil na kar qubool,
Laila bhi hum-nasheen ho to mehmal na kar qubool."
If you traverse the road of longing, do not settle for a destination.

Even if Layla herself walks beside you, do not accept the comfort of the litter.

And then this:

“Ae jooye aab, barh ke ho darya-e-tund-o-taiz,
Sahil tujhe ata ho to sahil na kar qubool.”
O little stream, surge forth and become a fierce and mighty river.
And if a shore is granted to you, reject it—flow on.

Iqbal’s words are not mere poetry—they are spiritual injunctions. Growth, especially in the life of a teacher, is not found in the quiet harbor but in the open sea. It demands that we abandon false comforts and embrace the divine restlessness of becoming. Like the stream that transforms into a roaring river by refusing to stop, so too must the teacher journey onward—through inquiry, reflection, failure, and renewal—until they become not a transmitter of stale knowledge, but a living source of wisdom. This is the path of those who educate not just minds, but souls.

And so, I stand before you today not as an expert, not as someone who has arrived, but as a fellow traveler—restless, curious, incomplete—still flowing, still learning…not just as a speaker, but as a person who is exposing himself quite honestly, and nervously, to your curious and reflective minds. I must admit: this is not something I have done very often. In fact, for a long time, I've carefully avoided it.

To be perfectly honest, I never imagined I would stand on a stage and speak to large groups of people. I never envisioned myself under the spotlight, addressing halls filled with students, researchers, or distinguished educators like yourselves. And yet—life, in its unpredictable wisdom, brought me here.

My early upbringing, you see, was immersed in the intimate spaces of traditional Sufi systems—quiet, contemplative, personal. In those silences and private circles, we were trained not to speak loudly but to listen deeply; not to proclaim, but to reflect; not to teach, but to hold space for learning to arise organically. There,

conversations happened in whispers or silence, often eye-to-eye or heart-to-heart. There was no stage—only sitting on the earth, and letting thoughts grow slowly, like moss in the forest.

This deeply private orientation made me, quite truthfully, skeptical of public sermons or the grand stage. Not out of arrogance, but because I feared the dilution of that sacred, inward journey. I feared the attention, and the performativity it can bring. In those early traditions, it was instilled in us that truth is best transmitted when no one is watching.

And then, as life would have it, I found myself in academia—where nearly every day, I must speak. I must teach. I must structure knowledge. I must present ideas. I had to unlearn some habits and build new ones.

But here's the struggle: my mind doesn't think in bullet points and PowerPoint slides. My spirit likes to wander. From philosophy to poetry, from a personal anecdote to a historical episode, from science to silence—I often drift freely, tempted by connections the mind makes in the

middle of speaking. And that radical freedom, which is so abundant in one-on-one conversations, is hard to exercise in formal academic settings, where the structure demands you stay “on topic”—as though a camel were asked to pass through the eye of a needle.

And so you see me here today—with this rather humble bundle of papers in hand—where I’ve attempted to jot down my thoughts, to give them some structure. Not because I don’t trust the spontaneity of the moment, but because I know myself. I know that I am a wanderer of ideas. And I need a compass today—not to confine my journey, but to keep me from straying too far off into the wild meadows of digression.

So if I pause, or look down, or seem like I’m searching for the thread—it is not because I lack clarity. It is because I want to honor this sacred space with both sincerity and coherence.

s the universe expands endlessly into the vast infinity of nothingness, so too does the path of knowledge, of seeking, of building a true personality. It has no final

destination. If the cosmos itself is unfinished—forever unfolding—then how can we ever claim to be complete? We are not monuments; we are rivers. We do not arrive; we evolve. Perfection is not a place we reach, but a direction we face. The journey is not towards a fixed goal, but into ever-deepening becoming.

And in the spirit of that becoming, of that eternal journey, Allama Iqbal, the poet of awakening, once wrote:

"Na pooch mujh se lazzat-e-khana-maan barbaad rehne ki,

Nasheman saikdon maine bana kar phoonk daale hain."

“Don’t ask me about the joy of having my nest destroyed—

For I have built and burned a hundred of them with my own hands.”

This is not despair—it is the courage of the seeker. The one who dares to let go of comfort, to burn the old in

search of the new. Who destroys the nest not out of loss, but for the possibility of flight. Because growth demands risk. Becoming demands fire. And learning, true learning, is the art of continual rebirth.

So burn what must be burned. And rise.

And as we close, I leave you with a simple truth:

I come to you, not as a finished product, but as someone still forming—like clay still moist with questions.

I come not to teach, but to walk with you—in thought, in feeling, and in reflection.

Let this not be a lecture, but a meditation.

Breathe. Think. Absorb. Reflect. Introspect.

And above all—contemplate.

So that together, we may find the patience to bear one another a little longer… and the strength to rise a little higher.

And what better place than *Vidya Vanam*, this forest of knowledge, to reflect on the question not just of *who we are*, but *who we are becoming*—as teachers, as mentors, as human beings.

The theme we explore today—*Teacher Personality Development*—is not merely a technical matter. It is deeply personal. It touches the roots of being, the soil of our emotional lives, the rivers of our thoughts, the wind of our presence.

So let us now gently turn toward this question—not as experts, but as gardeners of the self, and gently turn the gaze inward—toward the theme that gathers us here today: personality development.

The word personality finds its roots in the Greek word ***persona***, which originally meant a mask—specifically, the mask worn by actors in ancient theatre to depict various roles. It's fascinating, isn't it? That the very term we now use to define who we are... began as something we wear.

And in many ways, we still do.
We wear the mask of the teacher. The mask of the parent. The friend. The professional. The good citizen. These roles are necessary—but they are not the whole story. Because true development—authentic, spiritual, moral development—begins when we slowly begin to loosen the mask. When we dare to move
from *persona* to *presence*.
From performance to authenticity.
From impression to essence.
From "what I seem to be" to "what I truly am."

Recently, I shared a reflection on LinkedIn about how today's young people—19-year-olds armed with Wi-Fi and ambition—are caught in a relentless performance of success. Everyone seems to be a "Founder," "CEO," or "Thought Leader" before they even know who they truly are. This creates a "false self," a mask shaped by comparison and external applause, rather than genuine growth or being.

This culture pushes our youth to chase constant visibility and rapid achievement, making them anxious and disconnected from their true selves. It reminds me of Erich Fromm's wisdom: modern life often values "having" over "being." In teaching and guiding, especially in this age, our task is to nurture authentic becoming—a patient, quiet unfolding of the soul, rather than a noisy race for status.

If you are on LinkedIn, please go and read that post—and share your thoughts. It's a conversation we all need to have.

Coming back from this reflection on the masks we wear and the true self we seek, let us now turn our gaze to a modern lens that helps us understand the outward expressions of our inner worlds.

Modern psychology offers us a powerful tool for understanding personality in its observable forms—the Big Five model. This framework identifies five broad traits: extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness, and neuroticism. These traits

help us describe patterns of behavior, emotion, and thought that shape how we interact with the world and with others. This model has been rigorously tested and validated across cultures and continues to be one of the foundational language for psychologists to understand individual differences.

For example, extraversion captures the degree to which a person is outgoing or reserved, while conscientiousness reflects discipline and organization. Openness relates to curiosity and creativity, agreeableness to kindness and cooperation, and neuroticism to emotional sensitivity. These dimensions, valuable as they are, map the surface architecture of personality—the "how" of our social selves.

Yet, while the Big Five describes *what we do* and *how we tend to be*, it does not fully account for *who we become* at the deeper levels of our being- i.e. transcendental aspects. It remains descriptive rather than prescriptive; it explains patterns but does not guide transformation.

Our ancient traditions—Indian, Vedantic, Buddhist, Sufi—invite us to dive much deeper. They speak not merely of traits, but of temperaments and qualities of the soul—
of *niyat* (intention), *karuna* (compassion), *samyam* (self-restraint), *sabr*(patience), *ihsan* (excellence), and *tawakkul* (trust). These are not statistical traits. These are existential bearings, signposts on the journey of becoming. They are not just what we do—they are who we become. They direct the moral compass and spiritual horizon of personality beyond mere behavior.

That's why in our institution, Kumaraguru, we often say: **Character is life.**

Because personality, in its truest form, is not about being impressive. It is about being real.
Not polished, but present.
Not celebrated, but sincere.
Not loud, but luminous.

In the Sikh tradition, *seva*—selfless service—is not an extracurricular activity. It is sacred pedagogy. To serve

food in a *langar* is to cultivate humility. In Hindu temples and Sufi *khanqahs*, cooking, feeding, healing, listening—these are not just acts of kindness. These are lessons.

Because the teacher is not merely a dispenser of knowledge, but a mirror of values. A vessel of ethics. A flame of integrity.

And this, dear friends, is precisely why artificial intelligence—no matter how advanced—can never truly replace the human teacher.

Once, during a program, a colleague was speaking about how, in ancient times, the teacher was the sole bearer of knowledge. Students deeply revered their teachers because knowledge was scarce and precious, held only by them. But now, with the rise of AI and easy access to information, my colleague felt that teachers had lost their prestige and were no longer the only source of knowledge.

Listening to this, I realized that many people today—including my friend—have fundamentally misunderstood the true role of a teacher in society.

Yes, AI can process language, deliver lectures, generate explanations, and even mimic emotional tones. But what it cannot do—and what makes the teacher eternally relevant—is transmit cultural heritage, embody ethical life, and carry forward the symbolic imagination of a people.

Education, in our tradition, has never been a mere transfer of information. It is the inheritance of a worldview—a way of being, seeing, and feeling the world. Teachers are not just experts; they are custodians of civilization. They carry within them the *meeras*—the inheritance—of countless generations: of metaphors, dreams, humor, metaphysics, love songs, lullabies, protests, and prayers.

As Sufis remind us, true learning happens in *sohbet-e-shaikh*—through the companionship of the teacher. A companionship that transmits not just knowledge, but

presence, refinement, and values. It is through presence that character forms. Through character, culture is carried.

You see, every civilization has its archetypes—its symbolic figures of wisdom, courage, patience, and love. These are not just myths. They are templates of aspiration, passed down through language, gesture, ritual, and silence. The teacher—especially in the Eastern tradition—is a living link in that transmission.

This is why I say: AI may help you *know*, but only a teacher helps you *become*.

Machines may give you data, but they cannot give you dignity.
They may mimic your tone, but they cannot carry your memory.

Because education is not neutral. It carries its own metaphysics—its vision of what it means to be human. The way a people grieve, celebrate, remember, and dream—this too is part of education. The unconscious of

a culture lives in its language, its metaphors, its silences, its laughter. There are archetypes embedded in linguistic memory that cannot be translated without loss.

We inhabit a history of gestures, feelings, and cosmologies.
Our very instincts carry the rhythm of the words that shaped us.
We learn not only with our minds, but with the cradle of our unconscious.

Language, as the ancient masters of personality and self-development have taught us, is not merely a tool—it is the symbolic structure through which we desire, through which we connect with others, and even through which we suffer. A certain rhythm of thought, a certain shape of imagination, a unique flow of feeling—all of this is woven into the cultural fabric that shapes our identity. The words we choose, the richness of our vocabulary, and the way we speak are all reflections of a strong and refined personality. To cultivate beautiful speech is to cultivate the self itself.

When a teacher speaks to a student, it is never just knowledge that passes between them. It is the heartbeat of a culture, the breath of heritage, the whisper of ancestors and the echoes of countless stories. In that sacred space, values are transmitted, questions are sparked, and curiosity is nurtured. The teacher embodies not only facts but also the unspoken traditions—the mannerisms, the silences, the gestures that carry meaning beyond words. This living transmission shapes not only what a student knows, but who they become. No algorithm, no matter how advanced, can recreate this delicate dance of human connection. AI may provide answers, but it cannot kindle the soul's fire or carry the torch of collective memory that only a human teacher can pass on. This is why teaching remains an art, a sacred trust, and a human calling that technology cannot replace.

I would also like to add that, in our indigenous languages and mother tongues lies the deepest reservoir of this power. India's beauty is found in its hundreds of

languages, where even within a single language, dialects can change after just a few miles—this diversity is itself a living testament to the unity in diversity that defines our land. Preserving and speaking our mother tongue is not just a cultural duty—it is the key to transmitting our heritage, our wisdom, and the divine knowledge of learning and understanding. It is where the soul finds its purest voice, where prayers rise in the deepest chambers of the heart. We always pray in our mother tongue because it connects us most intimately with the divine. That, my friends, is a profound truth to reflect upon.

And to erase this vital aspect from personality—the art of beautiful, eloquent language—is to reduce the teacher to a mere content delivery system. In doing so, we risk losing the very soul of teaching: the living transmission of memory, culture, and wisdom that flows through words spoken with grace and depth.
Just because beautiful conversations unfold between teacher and student, knowledge is transmitted, and the seeds of heritage are gently sown in young minds. Through these living exchanges, the collective memory

of a culture, the heartbeat of a society, is passed down from one generation to the next.

This is why the teacher cannot be replaced—not now, not ever. Their presence transcends the intellectual realm; it is deeply existential. They are not merely conveyors of information or educators in a narrow sense. They are guardians of soul-memory, carriers of an invisible curriculum woven with stories, values, and the very essence of a people's identity. In their words, in their silences, in the rhythm of their speech, lives the spirit of a culture that no machine can replicate or replace.

And so, to those who argue that the age of the teacher is over because ChatGPT can answer questions—I say, with great humility but with equal certainty: You have misunderstood what teaching is.

For in our tradition, the teacher is not only one who teaches what *is*, but who awakens us to what *can be*. Not merely a deliverer of content, but a kindler of

conscience. Not just an instructor, but an inspirer of souls.

And this brings me, inevitably, to one of the most profound and enduring symbols of educational and spiritual flight ever imagined—the **Shaheen**.

From the rich soil of Eastern thought, Iqbal gifts us this majestic falcon as a living archetype, a **model of personality development** rooted deeply in courage, vision, and self-realization. The Shaheen is far more than a bird; it is a symbol of the fearless, value-rooted, and soul-anchored personality—the ideal that teachers and learners alike should aspire to embody.

Iqbal's Shaheen captures a uniquely Eastern vision of the self: not fragmented or merely functional, but whole, soaring, and ever-striving. As a beacon for growth, the Shaheen invites us to transcend complacency, embrace challenge, and rise with unwavering spirit toward our highest potential.

So, let us now turn our hearts and minds to this soaring symbol and reflect on what the Shaheen teaches us about becoming enlightened, creative, and courageous beings in the realm of knowledge and beyond.

1. High Flight (Buland Parwaz)

High flight is the soaring aspiration that lifts us beyond the ordinary, beyond the limits imposed by the world around us. Allama Iqbal powerfully urges us:

"Khudi ko kar buland itna ke har taqdeer se pehle,

Khuda bande se khud pooche, bata teri raza kya hai."

Develop the self so profoundly and powerfully that before every decree,

God Himself will ask you, "What is your wish?"

The Shaheen does not settle for low, easy paths. It soars far above the clouds to avoid the rain and the storms below. This is not mere escape, but a deliberate choice—

a refusal to be confined by narrow limits or mediocre horizons.

Think of the eagle—the symbol closest to this vision of the Shaheen. The eagle flies at breathtaking altitudes, where oxygen is thin and survival is a challenge for most creatures. Yet it dares to thrive there, to rule the highest skies. It is not content with lowly flight; it embodies boldness, resilience, and grandeur.

This is the spirit that true education must inspire in us: to think big, to dream beyond what seems possible, to refuse the smallness that society often imposes. It calls us to cultivate ambitions as vast as the sky itself, to embrace challenges that stretch our soul, and to survive—and even flourish—in places where others may falter.

High flight is the aspiration to live with courage and vision, to claim the freedom to create our own destiny rather than passively accept the one handed to us.

2. Far-Sightedness (*Tez Nigah*)

The Shaheen, like the eagle, is renowned for its razor-sharp, far-reaching vision. It doesn't see the world in fragments or silos but surveys the past, present, and future from its high vantage point. This far-sightedness is not just physical—it's symbolic of deep insight, foresight, and wisdom.

There's a reason we speak of "eagle-eyed" people—those with a visionary mind and an ability to see beyond the immediate. A true seeker of knowledge must be like the Shaheen: not swayed blindly by momentary trends, rigid traditions, or emotional fog. Instead, they must develop a panoramic intellect—critical, reflective, and far-seeing—where the dots of history, culture, and future possibility are connected into meaningful vision.

To be educated is not just to know facts, but to see the big picture, to anticipate, to imagine, and to plan with wisdom. Foresight is a mark of a strong personality—and of a true teacher.

3. Solitude and Independence (*Khalwat* & *Be-Niyazi*)

The Shaheen flies alone—not in flocks. This is not a sign of weakness, but of inner strength. It finds its rhythm in the sky, not in the noise of the crowd. In Iqbal's philosophy, *khalwat*—solitude—is not loneliness, but sacred space. It is where the self deepens, where creativity is born, and where conscience begins to speak.

Today, we live mostly alone—in urban flats, nuclear families, single rooms. From large joint families, we've moved to units of two or three. Yet strangely, we have never been more disconnected from true solitude. Because solitude is not about being alone in a room. It is about being present with yourself—without distraction, without the constant noise of the world.

Loneliness is painful disconnection. Solitude is powerful connection—with yourself, with nature, with the Divine. But why do we rarely feel it?

Because our minds are never alone. The moment we are still, we reach for a screen. Social media, mobile phones, endless scrolling—we are addicted to noise. We don't

reflect, we react. Studies now show that even toddlers are being diagnosed with screen-induced autism. Attention spans are shrinking. Anxiety is rising. Even our inner silence has been colonized.

Iqbal's *Be-Niyazi*—independence of spirit—is to seek value from within, not from likes, shares, or social approval. It means your motivation comes from principle, not from praise. A teacher or learner who cultivates solitude builds the inner space from which real wisdom flows. That is the independence that frees the spirit.

We must teach our students that their best ideas, their truest insights, will never come from the algorithm. They will come from stillness. From silence. From *khalwat*.

4. Fearlessness (Jurrat), Transformation, Independence.

One of the most profound images Iqbal offers is that of the falcon—facing the trial of its own becoming. When its beak dulls, its talons weaken, and its wings

grow heavy, the falcon makes a radical choice:
It retreats into solitude, plucks out its worn feathers, and waits—hungry, in pain, and utterly alone.
Not for escape. But for renewal.
This is **jurrat**—not the absence of fear, but the presence of an inner daring.
The courage to let go of what you have outgrown.
The audacity to start over when the world tells you to stay the same.

This is what makes the falcon a symbol of fearlessness—**and independence**.
Because true independence is not rebellion for its own sake.
It is the capacity to think freely, to choose your own path, and to rise above inherited limitations.
The falcon does not fly in flocks. It does not seek safety in numbers.
It dares to chart its own sky.
And that is the deeper call of education—not to produce obedient imitators, but original thinkers.

Not to make students fit into a pre-made mold, but to give them the wings to shape their own form.

In a world of conformity, where success is too often measured by how well we blend in,
the Shaheen reminds us: your path is your own.
It is not reckless to refuse the old feathers—it is necessary.
It is not arrogance to question the familiar—it is growth.

Yuval Noah Harari writes that the future will belong to those who can learn, unlearn, and relearn.
But Iqbal told us something even more timeless:
The task is not just to update our knowledge, but to **remake ourselves**.
The Shaheen does not fear the storm. It rises through it.
It does not adapt to the world as it is—it **transforms**, again and again, reinventing itself, becoming more true to itself each time.

That is what we must teach.
Not just skills, but soul.
Not just information, but inner strength.

Because without **jurrat**—without fearlessness and independence—we may survive, but we will never soar.

5. Self-Discipline (Zabt-e-Nafs)

The falcon hunts its own prey; it never feeds on what others have caught. It does not scavenge—it earns.
This teaches us something deeper than survival: it teaches self-respect, inner dignity, and authenticity.
The vulture lives off the dead; the falcon lives by its own strength.
That is the difference between existing with pride and merely existing.

Self-discipline is not just about controlling impulses—it is about living with purpose.
It is the courage to be original, to resist imitation, and to act from within.
A disciplined person doesn't ask, *"What will they think of me?"* but *"Is this true to who I am?"*
This is the quiet confidence of someone who has not borrowed their light from others, but discovered it in themselves.

As teachers and learners, we must resist the temptation to copy, conform, or take shortcuts.
Innovation, originality, and ethical integrity arise from this kind of self-mastery.

And this is not easy in our time.
We live in a world of distractions—short attention spans, constant stimulation, and digital addictions.
Even children are being diagnosed with screen-induced conditions; social media chips away at our focus and sense of self.
We're alone in our rooms, but never truly in solitude.
Because solitude requires silence, intention, reflection—not just the absence of company.

Iqbal reminds us:
"This universe is perhaps still unfinished, for the eternal call of 'Be!' continues to echo."
— *"Yeh kainaat abhi na tamam hai shayad, ki aa rahi hai damadam sada-e-Kun Faya-Kun."*

The universe is still in the making—and so are we.
This is what self-discipline really means:

To keep shaping yourself with integrity.
To stay grounded when the world pulls you in all directions.
To remain original in a world that rewards imitation.
And to walk with quiet pride—because you have earned your flight.

This spirit of constant becoming—of self-mastery intertwined with creative growth—is at the very heart of education's highest purpose. It is not simply about gathering information or passing exams; it is about nurturing a personality that is both deeply grounded in ethical values and fluidly compassionate, socially conscious and emotionally balanced.

And here, the wisdom of another towering figure resonates powerfully: Swami Vivekananda. His vision of education as a process of awakening the perfection already latent within each human being complements Iqbal's call to soar beyond limitations and continually reinvent the self.

Swami Ji famously said,
“Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.”

He did not speak of implanting new qualities, but of helping the student uncover what is already there—strength, confidence, empathy, and a harmonious integration of body, mind, and spirit.

Notice carefully: he did not say education puts perfection into us. No, perfection is not something external to be poured in like a vessel. It already exists within, like a dormant flame waiting patiently to be kindled. Our role as teachers, then, is less about filling minds and more about unveiling that latent brilliance—awakening the soul to its own vast potential.

For Swami Ji, education has four essential aims:

- **Strength of character**—the unshakeable backbone that holds one firm amid life’s storms.

- **Self-confidence**—the quiet, radiant assurance that comes from knowing your own worth and power.
- **Empathy**—the heart's capacity to truly feel and respond to the joys and sufferings of others.
- **Integration of body, mind, and spirit**—a harmony that honors the whole human being, not just fragments.

Thus, education must not only broaden the horizons of intellect but also deepen the roots of the soul. It is not a mere intellectual exercise but a sacred journey—an awakening of the spirit in balance with social responsibility and emotional wisdom.

And beyond these foundational aims, Swami Vivekananda's teachings offer profound guidance for the development of the teacher's personality itself—because the soul of education lies not in curricula or methods, but in the living presence of the teacher. The teacher is a living embodiment of these virtues. For Swami Ji, the teacher is not a mere conveyor of knowledge but

a manifestation of ideals—a beacon of strength, compassion, and wisdom that awakens these qualities in the student.

He emphasized the importance of self-mastery, the internal harmony that allows a teacher to be a steady guide. Only when a teacher has cultivated calmness amidst chaos, clarity amidst confusion, and love amidst judgment, can they truly nurture the socio-emotional well-being of their students.

This is the heart of what modern education calls Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL)—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in ourselves and others; to foster empathy; and to build meaningful, respectful relationships. Swami Vivekananda's vision was centuries ahead of his time, urging educators to awaken the whole person—not just the intellect but the emotions, values, and spirit. He said:
"You have to grow from the inside out. None can teach you, none can make you spiritual. There is no other teacher but your own soul."

In practical terms, this means a teacher's emotional intelligence, resilience, and integrity are as critical as their knowledge. Their personality must radiate authenticity—not the mask of perfection but the courage to be real and vulnerable, inspiring trust and connection.

Swami Ji also stressed the importance of fearlessness and continuous growth in teachers, echoing Iqbal's Shaheen spirit. A teacher must be willing to unlearn, to face their own shadows, and to adapt with humility. This openness is what allows for a classroom where students feel safe to explore their own inner worlds and develop social skills rooted in respect and compassion.

In this way, the teacher becomes a living bridge between tradition and innovation, intellect and intuition, individual and community.

So, education is not merely about shaping minds but awakening souls—and the teacher's personality,

aligned with these timeless values, is the catalyst for this awakening.

Since much of our conversation today has revolved around personality, society, and the landscape of emotions, it's only fitting that we pause to explore a concept that elegantly captures all these dimensions in a structured way—Social and Emotional Learning, or SEL. Though the term may sound technical and modern, at its very core, SEL is something profoundly simple: the deep understanding of ourselves, the wise management of our emotions, the cultivation of empathy—the ability to truly feel for others—building authentic relationships, and making choices rooted in ethics and wisdom.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Because this is not new. Our ancient traditions—Indian, Islamic, Vedantic, Sufi—have embodied this wisdom since time immemorial. Consider the Sanskrit word ***Anubhava***—that deep, experiential knowing and self-realization which no exam or test can ever capture. Or ***Sanyam***—the sacred discipline not merely of the body, but of the restless

mind and the turbulent heart. ***Karuna***—compassion arising naturally when the boundaries between self and other dissolve. And of course, ***Satya*** **and** ***Dharma***—truth and righteousness—the invisible compass that guides every ethical step we take.

What captivates me most is how these ancient words speak directly to our modern yearning for education that nurtures not just clever minds, but kind hearts and balanced souls. It is a reminder that true learning is never about stuffing heads with facts alone; it is about awakening the whole person—socially, emotionally, spiritually.

So when we speak of SEL, we are really returning to an eternal truth: education is a journey of the soul, a sacred cultivation of the inner garden where character blooms, empathy flows, and wisdom takes deep root.

And this understanding—that true connection transcends words and languages—reminds me of a story very close to my heart.

My grandmother was a remarkable woman—noble, graceful, and brave—a daughter of a royal warrior lineage. She had a dear friend from a neighbouring family who spoke a completely different language. My grandmother spoke only Kashmiri; her friend only Sarazi. Their languages were worlds apart, yet they would sit for hours together—talking, laughing, sometimes even crying.

As a child, I was puzzled. I once asked her, **"Dadi Amma, what is she saying?"**

She smiled gently and said, "Oh child, she is a heartbroken woman. She has suffered much."

I pressed on, "But how do you understand her if you don't speak her language?"

And she replied with a wisdom that has stayed with me ever since: "The heart does not need a vocabulary."

Many years after my childhood, I came to truly understand how my grandmother could grasp the pain,

the joy, and the spirit of her friend without knowing a single word of her language. This profound understanding dawned on me after discovering an important passage in Hazrat Inayat Khan's *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*, where he writes:

"There is the story of the Apostles who instantly knew many languages. This does not mean they knew French, English, German, or Spanish. Rather, they knew the language of every soul, that every soul began to speak to them, and they began to communicate with every person. The meaning of revelation is the understanding of the language of the soul."

— Hazrat Inayat Khan

These words illuminated for me the essence of what my grandmother embodied—an intuitive, heartfelt empathy that transcends spoken words, a connection beyond language, a communion of souls.

In this small story of my grandmother lies a secret blueprint for all teachers: to become fluent in this divine

language, to inspire not just knowledge but the living heritage of culture, wisdom, and spirit within the hearts of young students.

Because true education is never merely about the transmission of facts; it is the awakening of the soul's language, the silent dialogue that nurtures understanding, compassion, and presence.

Dear teachers, as we stand at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, let us remember this: water flows gracefully from higher ground to lower, nourishing all in its path without resistance or arrogance. In this sacred metaphor, the teacher must be that higher ground—steady in character, boundless in compassion, and fearless in courage.

Be the Falcon—soaring above limitations, eyes sharp with wisdom, wings strong with self-discipline. Be the Guru who listens deeply, not just to words but to the silent yearnings of the soul. Be the Vanam—the sacred forest—where all beings, diverse and unique, find refuge, learn, and grow.

Our task is not to teach only from textbooks but to open the Book of Life itself, revealing its mysteries through presence, through story, through lived example.

As Rumi reminds us with eternal wisdom:

"Don’t you know yet? It is your light that lights the worlds."

Let your light be the flame that kindles hope, understanding, and transformation in every heart you touch.

Thank you.